



CHINA'S INTERESTS IN PAKISTAN OCCUPIED KASHMIR (POK)

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ABSTRACT

Chinese interest in the strategically important region of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) lies in its quest to access Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean region through PoK; get hold of the natural resources essential for its economic growth; expand its area of influence in the region and keep a close eye on the developments in the region as a whole and India in particular.

The Chinese presence in PoK provides her with an advantage to consolidate its position in Tibet and Xinjiang. Further, the Karakoram Highway passing through the PoK and the Gwadar seaport at the Arabian Sea offer her crucial direct overland entrée into the Indian Ocean Region. In future, China plans to construct a network of roads, railways and gas pipelines along the region to have direct overland access to the Persian Gulf energy resources.

Key Words: Gilgit-Baltistan, Karakoram Highway, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Gwadar, People's Liberation Army and Xinjiang.

China's growing presence and interest in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) has added another strategic dimension to the Karakoram Region of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) which includes the Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) known as 'Northern Areas' till August 2009 and the so called "Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK)" as referred by Pakistan. It has been under illegitimate control of Pakistan since October 22, 1947, when tribals organized as lashkars by Pakistan invaded the Jammu and Kashmir¹, which led to the 1947-48 war between India and Pakistan. In 1949, the

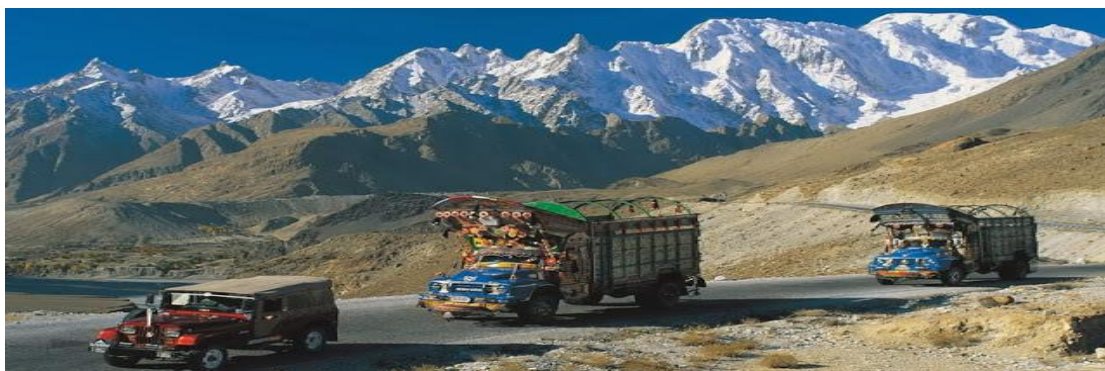
UN sponsored ceasefire was formally implemented by India and Pakistan. But by that time Pakistan had occupied one-third of Jammu and Kashmir which is still under its control.

The region of PoK is of great geo-political, economic, strategic and military importance due to its geographical location which lies at the confluence of the three major mountain ranges consisting the Karakoram, Himalayas and Hindukush. For decades, the Himalayan range has demonstrated the importance of an alliance between China and Pakistan. China is deeply engaged in large number of economic activities in PoK in developmental projects. This has multiple strategic implications for regional security, especially for India.

Close relations between China and Pakistan were initially forged between the two countries due to the mutual rivalry with India. After the India-China war in 1961, Pakistan ceded the 5,180 sq kms Trans-Karakoram Tract south of Mintaka Pass bordering Gilgit to China based on the China-Pakistan Agreement, 1963. The then Foreign Minister of Pakistan Mr. Z. A. Bhutto initiated the process of reaching out to China and over a period of time this partnership between the two got elevated to “all-weather friendship”, which now extends to the diplomatic, economic, and military realms.

The 1963 Agreement proved to be crucial for construction the Karakoram Highway* through Gilgit-Baltistan region of PoK. Initially, the project was started by Pakistan but by mid-1970s, the Chinese inducted 10,000 workers into Pakistan to complete the highway.² It is a 1300 long km road which runs athwart the Karakoram mountain range via the Khunjerab Pass and connects the strategically important trading town of Kashgar in Xinjiang and Pakistan’s capital Islamabad.³

Figure 2.7: Karakoram Highway Roads and Rivers network in Gilgit-Baltistan

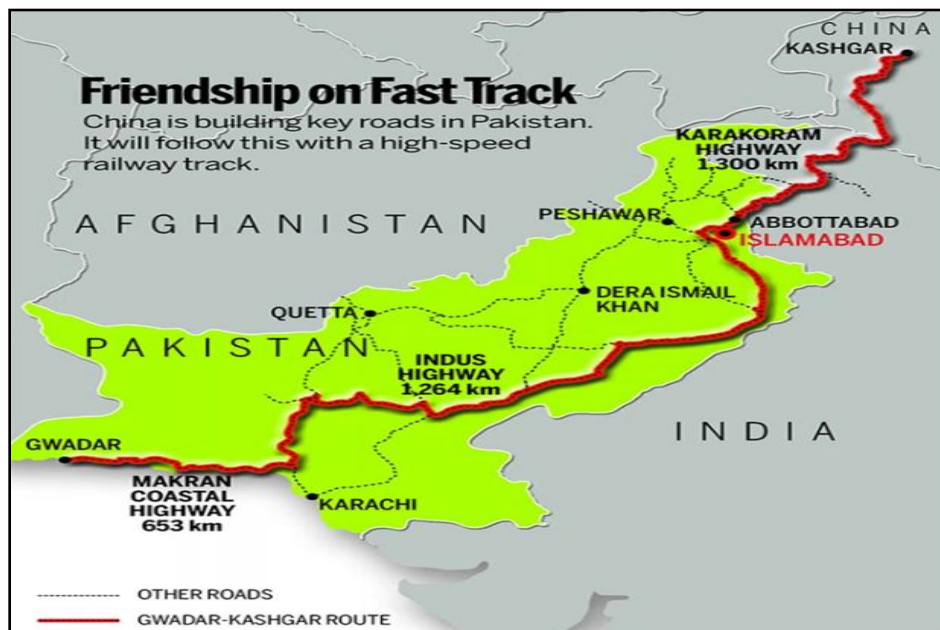


(Source: <http://www.travelpk.org/2013/01/the-karakoram-highway-8th-wonder-of.html>)

China was interested in construction of the Karakoram Highway due to its strategic and economic interests in the region.* Passing through high altitude and rough terrain, the highway is of immense strategic significance and an important link between Pakistan and China. It cuts through the collision zone between the Eurasian and Indian plates, where China Tajikistan and Afghanistan and Pakistan are within 250 kms of each other.⁴ The road provides China with the direct entrée to Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal.

During the early and mid-1980s, China used the Karakoram Highway to transfer military supplies and manpower from Xinjiang to the Afghan mujahedeen to sustain the Afghan-Soviet War. China also provided extensive military assistance to Pakistan and supplied the military equipment, arms ammunitions and nuclear withal using this corridor. In return, Pakistan used the route to supply high-tech weapons including unexploded American like Tomahawk missiles from the Afghan jihad theatre to China for reverse engineering.⁵

Figure 3.2: Proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor



(Source: <http://defence.pk/threads/china-ready-to-build-economic-corridor-with-pakistan.308773/>).

* It was a smart move by China who decided to befriend Pakistan; and built KKH to achieve its strategic and economic goals in Afghanistan, the Indian Oceanic Region (IOR), the Persian Gulf, the Middle East and Africa. This enabled China to establish naval bases in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and pursue the overland global trade with Central Asia and other nations. See, Sering, Senge H, "Expansion of the Karakoram Corridor- Implications and Prospects", Occasional Paper No. 27, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Lancers Books, New Delhi, Sep 2012, pp. 12-14.

in April 2015, the region of PoK and the Karakoram Highway came under intense international focus after the China unveiled its strategy of developing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and link Pakistan with its flagship “One Belt, One Road (OBOR)” initiative. OBOR involves creation of the “Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)” connecting the countries of the original “Silk Road”; linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central and West Asia. At the same time, a 21st century maritime silk road (MSR) is planned to link Chinese eastern seaports with the Middle East and African coasts through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean and further connecting to Europe through the Suez Canal.

China has dedicated US \$46 billion to build transport and energy connectivity through 3,000 km network of roads, railways and pipelines from Kashgar in northwestern China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar Port in Baluchistan. The analysts all over the world are bewildered over the exceptional US \$46 billion Chinese investment in Pakistan, which is almost equivalent to 20 per cent of Pakistan's annual GDP.

The economic corridor includes up-gradation of the Karakoram Highway and construction of a 1,100 km long railway line along the highway, which will enable covering the stretch between Islamabad and Kashgar in Xinjiang in less than seventeen hours. The other plans include coal, wind, solar and hydro energy projects, which is expected to produce more than 10,000 megawatts of energy to Pakistan. The investment envisaged through China Pakistan Economic Corridor will be spread over two and a half decades. The transport corridors and energy projects will be finished in the first phase and in the second phase; the special economic zones and economic nodes as well as other balance of the projects are expected to be completed by 2030.

The CPEC provides a shorter route to China for pursuing its economic interests in Middle East and Africa. The existing course of transportation of oil and other merchandise between Chinese ports and Middle East via Malacca Straits is approximately 12,000 km long. There is additional 3,500 km overland for the commodities to pass through Chinese eastern ports to its westernmost province, Xinjiang. However, the stretch from Gwadar Port to Xinjiang through Pakistan and PoK is just 3,000 km, saving lot of shipment time, distance and costs.⁶

China is dependent on sea trade that accounts for 90% of its trade with the world. Exports that are a mainstay of China's financial prowess and key imports such as oil and gas are transported

via the seas. Approximately, 70~80% of China's oil imports goes through Malacca Strait, and 40% through Strait of Hormuz (Persian Gulf).⁷ China intends to make full use of the Chinese-constructed and operated Gwadar Port which serves as the access point through which energy shipments could arrive and be sent to its mainland directly through Pakistan and PoK.⁸ This will also permit China to avoid routes and bypass choke-points such as Malacca Straits, where a strong US naval presence could allow for blockades, thereby disrupted its shipping lanes.⁹

The economic corridor is also facing tremendous challenges due to the hostile environment and the poor security conditions lending a strong rationality to the Chinese presence in Pakistan and providing the opportunity to turn Gwadar into an outpost of the Chinese Navy in the Arabian Sea. Securing the planned \$46 billion economic corridor of roads, railways and pipelines from northwest China to Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast is a huge challenge in a country where Islamist militants and separatist gunmen are a constant menace.¹⁰

The extent of Chinese presence in PoK can be estimated by the number of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) workers and technicians are involved in the infrastructure projects. In 2010-11, there was increase in Chinese activity in PoK. According to various reports, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) was performing an important task in GB by employing engineers, technicians and computer professionals for developmental projects.* The reports from a variety of foreign intelligence sources, Pakistani journalists and Pakistani human rights workers reveal two important new developments in Gilgit-Baltistan, "a simmering rebellion against Pakistani rule and the influx of an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 soldiers of the People's Liberation Army."**¹¹

* In 2010, a well known international analyst, Selig Harrison stated that many PLA soldiers in GB are working towards up gradation of the Karakoram highway and building a railroad to link China's Xinjiang Province with Pakistan. Others are working on dams, expressways and other projects. See, Harrison, Selig S, "China's Discreet Hold on Pakistan's Northern Borderlands", The New York Times, 26 Aug 2010 at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/opinion/27iht-edharrison.html?_r=0.

** In October 2011, Chief of the Indian Army, General V.K. Singh also endorsed this possibility by stating there could be 3000-4000 PLA soldiers in this region. See, Singh, Priyanka, "What security implications do you see by the presence of PLA or the Chinese army in the Pakistan occupied Kashmir?", Ask An Expert, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, at <http://www.idsa.in/askanexpert/PLAortheChinesearmyinthePoK>

Another reason for China's enhanced interest in PoK is the terrorism threat in Xinjiang. China has indeed repeatedly pointed towards foreign organizations trained in Pakistan for incidents in the Xingjiang autonomous region, which has become ears a hot spot for ethnic tensions. It has also become a battlefield for the Al-Qaeda-linked East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) terrorist group that has launched numerous attacks against police or government officials. China is concerned that ETIM has indeed established operating bases in PoK. In this context, the sectarian violence in Gilgit Baltistan is extremely perturbing, as there are being made attempts by radical organizations and terrorist groups to to take a firm hold over the territory.¹²

Though Gilgit-Baltistan is today an impoverished region suffering from its physical isolation and harsh environmental conditions, its geographical position has increased its strategic importance, mainly for China, who could use it as an asset in its balance of power in South and Central Asia. Moreover, the withdrawal of the western armies from Afghanistan could offer China the opportunity to exploit the vacuum of power to affirm its position as the main actor in the region.¹³

The Karakoram Highway has turned out to be a strategically important linkage between China and Pakistan. It has strengthened the links within the Pakistan-China military-politico nexus and the interdependency through the Karakoram corridor in PoK. The mutual collusively between the two has allowed China to use Pakistan as her security front and as a low-cost but high- efficiency deterrent against India's growing political and economic power.¹⁴

India is concerned over a Sino-Pak entente that heightens its security predicament and brings the scenario of the of a two-front war possibility with Pakistan and China even as it actively seeks dialogues with both, to diminish the chances of such a dire scenario.¹⁵ This poses a serious threat to India in the event of combined operations facilitated by the Karakoram Highway and in the situation of any hostility with Pakistan or China; it has a considerable strategic consequence.¹⁶ The reports of presence of PLA troops in PoK have been repeatedly denied by both China and Pakistan. While Chinese ascribe this to the economic and infrastructure development in the region, this conspicuous presence is a cause for concern for India.

It is important for India to review its stand on PoK and cogently articulate its rightful claims over the region and denounce Pakistan's illegal occupation. Sporadic and disjointed views over PoK will not serve India's interests, especially in the context of China's investment and infrastructural construction activities under CPEC. Besides, India needs to raise the matter with China at the bilateral level in terms of Beijing restraining itself from making any investment or construction activities in PoK, which 'historically' belongs to India and has direct effect over India's sovereignty.

In December 2014, while responding to a query in the Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj, Minister for External Affairs of India stated, "Government has seen reports with regard to China and Pakistan being involved in infrastructure building activities in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), including construction of CPEC. Government has conveyed its concerns to China about their activities in PoK, and asked them to cease such activities."¹⁷

China's geopolitical goals are increasingly global, expanding beyond its immediate neighborhood. The decision to announce its massive investment in the CPEC is a clear indication that it views Pakistan as an important ally in meeting their ambitious economic and political goals.¹⁸ China should understand that its irrational and contradictory approach towards India on South China Sea and CPEC may affect and limit the scope for regional cooperation. The Joint Statement between two countries on 15 May 2015, released during India's PM Narendra Modi's visit to China, does recognize the emergence of India and China as 'two major powers' in regional as well as world politics, which indicates that their cooperative relations will be key to the realisation of an 'Asian Century'.¹⁹

Endnotes:

¹ PoK Project Report, Pakistan occupied Kashmir: Changing the Discourse, Institute of Defense Studies and Analysis, New Delhi, May 2011, p. 9.

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⁴ "Karakoram Highway", The Info List at [http://www.theinfolist.com/php/SummaryGet.php?FindGo=N_35%20Highway%20\(pakistan\)](http://www.theinfolist.com/php/SummaryGet.php?FindGo=N_35%20Highway%20(pakistan)).

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- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Sushma Swaraj, Minister for External Affairs, Responding to a query in the Lok Sabha in December 2014.
- ¹⁸ Ritzinger, Louis, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ Joint Statement between the India and China during Prime Minister's visit to China, Press Information Bureau: Government of India, Prime Minister’s Office, New Delhi, 15 May 2015.